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COUNSELOR CONNECTION

VOLUME X, NO. 2, NOVEMBER 2006
HIGH SCHOOL

Students should pay attention to deadlines

Now is the time high school seniors need to start paying close attention to application deadlines for college admissions and financial aid. Here are some tips from the Alabama Student Loan Program and The Student Loan Peoplesm.

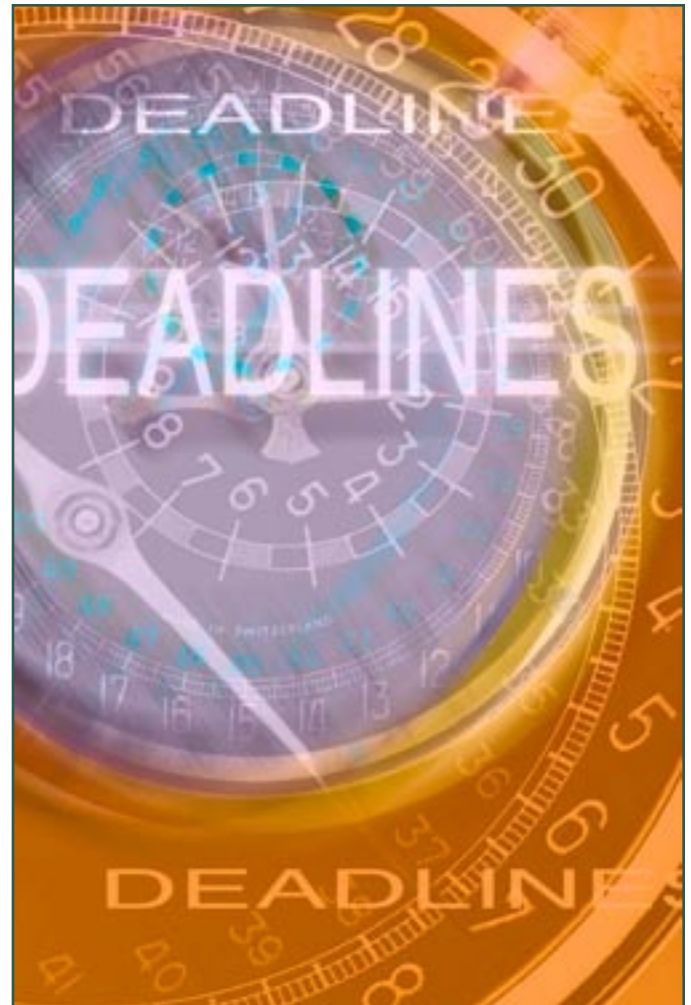
If students haven't yet picked a college yet, they should narrow their list by visiting schools and talking with their parents and counselor. Students should also visit campus and talk with students going to school there already. And they can compare schools and take virtual campus tours at www.AlabamaMentor.org.

Students who plan to go through the Early Decision process should check about deadlines. Most schools request the applications be submitted about this time of year. Students going through the regular admissions process should talk with teachers about writing recommendations and to work on an admissions essay if they have to write one.

Now is also the time for students to check with the financial aid offices of the schools to which they're applying to see if the schools require any financial aid forms other than the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). It's also a good time for students to familiarize themselves with the FAFSA. Unless they're starting college before July 1, they can't file the FAFSA until after the first of the year. But they should take a look at the information it requires so they'll be ready to file it as soon as they can.

College-bound seniors should attend any college fairs and financial aid seminars offered in the area. If a company wants to charge a fee for helping students and parents with admissions and financial aid applications, they can make sure it's a reputable company by checking with the State Attorney General's office or Better Business Bureau in the area and the area where the firm is located.

For more information about financial aid and college planning, students can visit www.AlabamaMentor.org; write the Alabama Student Loan Program, 100 North Union Street, Suite 308, Montgomery, AL 36104-3761; or call 334-265-9720, toll free (800) 721-9720.



USDE finalizes two ACG/SMART rules

The U.S. Department of Education has issued final rules governing two aspects of the new Academic Competitiveness Grants (ACG) and the National Science & Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (SMART) Grants.

The department requested comments from the financial aid community about rules concerning prior enrollment in a postsecondary program and Federal Pell Grant eligibility.

Under the proposed ACG rules, students would not be eligible for ACG grants their first year in college if the students had been previously enrolled as regular students in an undergraduate program. Several people asked how this would affect high school students enrolled in dual credit programs. The final rule states that students are not eligible for a first-year ACG if the students were previously enrolled as regular students in an ACG-eligible program. High school students who took college courses but not as regular college students would be eligible for a first-year ACG upon becoming regular students in an eligible program after finishing high school. However, high school students enrolled as regular students in a college program would not be eligible for a first-year ACG. After they finish their first academic year in an eligible college program, they could be eligible for a second-year ACG award.

The department's original rules called for students to be eligible for ACG and SMART awards only if they were also receiving a Federal Pell Grant for the same payment period. After reviewing the comments it received, the department changed the rule to allow students to be eligible for ACG and SMART awards if they received a Pell Grant during the same award year. This means students who receive Pell Grants during the fall and spring semesters may receive ACG and SMART awards for summer school.

Nearly 3.2 million took online classes in 2005

Nearly 3.2 million students took online courses in the fall 2005 term, according to a report from the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C). That represented about a 35 percent increase from the previous fall. The report is based on responses from more than 2,200 colleges and universities, according to Sloan-C. According to the report, online students tend to be older than traditional students and generally have jobs and family responsibilities. Most are undergraduate students, although the percentage of graduate students is slightly higher among online students than in the general student population.

As in past years, the responses from schools indicate that public colleges and universities are more likely to provide online programs and to have a positive view of online education. By an increasing margin, schools' chief academic officers say they think that the quality of online instruction is equal to or superior to that of in-class instruction. The percentage who think online instruction is equal to face-to-face instruction is now 62 percent, while nearly 17 percent think online instruction is superior to face-to-face instruction.

According to nearly two-thirds of the chief academic officers, the greatest barrier to the widespread adoption of online education is the need for more discipline on the part of students. Two other important barriers involve faculty issues. First, faculty members need to be more open to online education. Second, teaching online courses requires more time and effort on the part of faculty.

Sloan-C was created with funds from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and tries to help schools improve their online educational programs.

Correction

The toll-free phone number for the admissions office of Birmingham-Southern College was printed incorrectly in the 2006-2007 edition of *Getting In*. The correct number is (800) 523-5793.

